

# Teaching the Mind to Swim



## A breakthrough Insight into an Easier Way to Teach Adults to Swim

### Teaching the Mind to Swim

When an adult tries to learn to swim, they are operating with a body that does not know the correct movements and a nervous mind that does not know what to do. All of this happening in an unfamiliar environment.

As a swim instructor, I began teaching adults to swim using the standard techniques that I was taught. A couple of sessions per week, kick with the kickboard, stay streamline, move your arms like this, and repeatedly saying “Yes, the breathing is tricky, but you will get it”.

After watching many students struggling to learn week after week and often giving up in frustration, I thought, “There has to be a better way.”



Many adults wanting to learn to swim had previously tried to teach themselves, or had a few lessons, but had been unsuccessful. They may have been fit enough to swim but they came to my lessons with their mind awash with negative thoughts, self-doubt, sometimes trauma, and poor technique imprinted into their muscle memory.

### The Breakthrough Insight

One day as I watched a very fit student punch the water and cry out, “Why can’t I do this, I am hopeless”, I realised that I had always been trying to teach the body to swim, but not the mind. This insight was a breakthrough, and a game changer. For most adults

learning to swim, the mind is the limiting factor in learning to swim, not the body, but we spent most of our time working on the body.

I started teaching the mind of the learner about swimming and getting it to understand and believe it can do the actions. The mind then gets the body to co-operate and swim. It is amazing how much faster people learn to swim, and they seem to enjoy it much more.

### **Get the Mind to Believe:**

- ≈ What is their Purpose: Discuss why the student wants to learn to swim, and help them believe they can do it. The bigger the purpose the more determined they are to learn.
- ≈ Where is Their Mind? Are they keen? Do they need to learn rather than want to learn? Are they frightened? If you know where their mind is you can start from this point and move them forward.
- ≈ Pre-Lesson Talk: Before entering the water explain and discuss the broad principles of swimming. This includes how everyone can learn to swim, buoyancy, the value of floating well, and being streamline. The more the mind understands swimming, the easier it will find it to do.



- ≈ Discuss with Students the Power of Positive Mind Self-Talk: Get them to use constant self-talk like “I can float”, “I can swim”, “I am a Swimmer” and “I have plenty of time for a breath”. The mind leads and the body follows. Pull them up every time they express a negative thought about not being able to swim.

### **Get the Mind to Understand:**

- ≈ Many adult non-swimmers come with a childhood water trauma. This can be a big mental block, after all, it may have stopped them swimming for much of their

life. Talking to them about it and letting them tell their story and how they would like to move past helps them understand it. Please note that I am talking about people who are nervous in the water and not aquaphobia where they may be too scared to even enter the water.

- ≈ **Swimming & Water Experiments:** Help the mind to understand the science of swimming for each little step with an explanation, a simple experiment and a little practice. This helps the person believe that they can do it. Furthermore, they fully understand why they do things and it allows them to play and experiment with their swimming technique.
- ≈ **Out of Water Practice:** Land drills practiced in front of a mirror lets them see and learn the arm movements so the mind and body know what to do, without the complication of being in the water. This also helps them stretch and strengthen the parts of the body used for swimming. Practicing swimming skills while walking in the pool are also very useful.
- ≈ **Mistakes and Failures Highlight Issues:** Convince the student's mind that mistakes and failures are great and not something to be avoided. They highlight the weak points that may have been holding their swimming back. Once known, these parts can be fixed giving the mind more confidence.
- ≈ **Reinforce Relaxing:** Repeatedly say, "Relax", and have the student take a couple of deep breaths, so that the mind and body can remember to relax.

### **Get the Body to Do:**

- ≈ **Small Parts:** Break swimming down into small parts. For example, the stroke can be broken down into about four parts, and the kicking into three parts. One by one, introduce each part and get them to master it and have their mind happy, before moving on to the next one. Each successfully practiced skill builds confidence. Because the steps are small, on average people only need to repeat the same exercise three to six times for the mind and body to work it out. Each time reinforce with positive words that they are getting it. I do stroke and breathing practice with the student walking in the pool.
- ≈ **Have Students Talk to Their Body:** The body often doesn't know what to do or how to operate in water which is an unnatural environment for many learners. I get people to talk to their body and tell it what to do. A common example is

asking people to tell their feet to “come up to the surface of the water”, or telling their arm to “stay out in front”.



- ≈ **Single Point of Practice Focus:** The mind gets easily overloaded when they are trying to master a number of skills at one time. Floating, kicking, stroking, breathing, there is so much to try and get right at the same time. Once the mind is overloaded none of the skills are practiced properly. If they focus on just one skill over a short distance and to let everything else go to pot if it wants to, the one skill they are focussing on improves. For example, ‘Just focus on keeping your feet near the surface’, or ‘Just focus on feeling the pull through the water’. By repeating this with each skill eventually all the skills improve. The mind can see the one skill improving and gets confident, rather than the feeling of doing all skills poorly.
- ≈ **Have Some Fun:** People learn faster when their mind is relaxed and they are having fun, rather than when they are nervous and tense. Take some time for water play during lessons.
- ≈ **Build Student Belief That They Can Do It:** Belief is king. Many start with little belief in their ability to swim. Little successes with lots of encouragement turns the doubts into ‘maybe possible’ into ‘I can do it’. Constantly reassure the mind that a drill can be done.
- ≈ **Avoid Reliance on Swim Aids:** I avoid flippers, kickboards and pull buoys when teaching people to swim. These are great to add interest and improve technique when they can swim, but for the learner’s mind, they think they need them to swim.

### **Get the Mind and Body to Remember:**

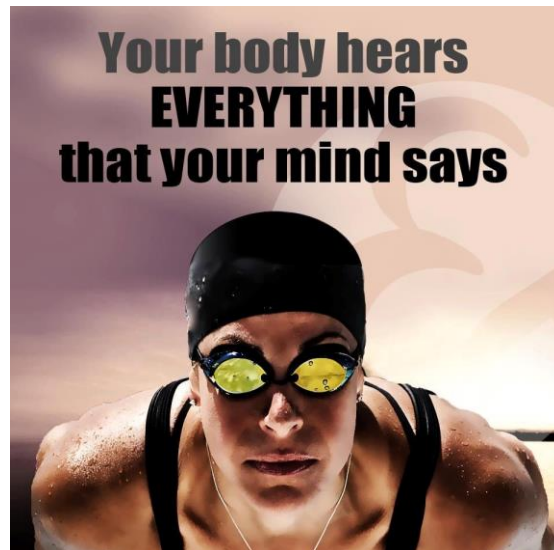
- ≈ **Swim fit.** Once the swimmers know what to do and believe they can do it, the next phase is to practice as much as possible over the next few weeks to get “Swim Fit”. This not only gets the body physically conditioned; it also locks in

the correct technique. To start things off I recommend practicing at least three times per week for three weeks.

- ≈ Watch & Learn from Other Swimmers: Spend a little time watching and discussing other swimmers. Highlight good and poor aspects of the other swimmers and ask for the student's thoughts.

### **When Mind & Body Work together**

When the body knows the swimming actions and the mind is confident that it can do it, like magic, swimming becomes relaxed and easy. The student will learn to swim in a much shorter time, and without all the frustration.



Credit: Oklahoma Sports & Fitness

## Can You Teach an Adult to Swim in One Three-Hour Session?

If you have an interest in reading any of my free booklets just contact me:

How to Teach an Adult to Swim in One Three-Hour Session

Adult Learn to Swim Guide - For People with no Access to a Swim Instructor

Ocean Swimming Skills You Can Practice in the Pool

Adult Learn to Swim - Home Practice before the First Pool Lesson

The Easiest Way to Swim in Fatigues ( fully clothed )

The Secret to Teaching Butterfly to Older people

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